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HOUSEWIVES' CHAT

Monday, October 2, 1939.

Subject: "FOOD POISONING." Information from the Food and Drug Administration, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Crisp cool fall days may tempt the housewife to relax her vigilance in caring for those foods that spoil easily. At the height of the summer every one who has any means of refrigeration uses it to keep milk and meat, leftovers, egg and milk desserts, soup stock, and other perishable desserts safely from day to day. In fact, from one part of a day to another.

But when the weather turns cooler, the custard may stand about in the kitchen longer than the housewife realizes. Hash or leftover vegetables may wait on the kitchen table from one meal to another instead of being covered promptly and put in the icebox or mechanical refrigerator, or down cellar if that is where low temperatures are found. The outside temperature may be cool enough to suggest wearing a sweater. But that's not cool enough to prevent food-poisoning organisms from growing rapidly in certain foods. Milk and meat in particular, and dishes made from either, must be stored below 50 degrees Fahrenheit to be safe.

Every year the Food and Drug Administration investigates a great many separate cases of food-poisoning, and sometimes community outbreaks in which a number of persons have been ^{made} sick, or have died. Time and time again these large scale outbreaks are traceable to affairs like community picnics or church or other group suppers, where there are poor facilities for handling perishable foods properly.

Last year the Food and Drug inspectors investigated 75 alleged food-poisoning outbreaks. Most of these proved to be due to eating uncooked foods that had

became contaminated, or foods usually eaten cold, like potato and other salads, cream-filled pastries, cold meats and cheese. Altogether 56 types of foodstuffs figured in these food-poisoning cases. They occurred in 30 states and in 65 different communities. While there was always the possibility that some of the foods often violated the Food and Drugs Act in some way, ordinary carelessness was responsible for most of the illness.

Underprocessed home canned foods caused 8 outbreaks. The foods included buffalo meat, peas, spinach, okra, pepper grass, green beans, corn, and home-canned fried chicken. Fatalities occurred in seven of the outbreaks. The deaths were due to a toxin produced by the organism called Clostridium botulinum which develops in canned non-acid foods if contamination with it has occurred and the foods have not been adequately processed.

In respect to home canning, for at least 15 years the U.S. Department of Agriculture through its publications and Extension Service teaching has advocated that only the steam pressure cooker be used for canning meats, poultry, fish, and all non-acid vegetables. Canning experts have also said many times that only fresh, sound materials should be canned, and that home canning operations should only be carried on in completely clean, sanitary surroundings.

It is significant of the care taken by commercial canneries that during the past year the Food and Drug Administration found no proven case of botulism due to commercially canned foods.

One food-poisoning outbreak investigated by the Food and Drug men was caused by Jinson wood seeds accidentally milled with buckwheat flour. Mild distress was suffered by members of 8 families. Their illness led to the seizure of 6 shipments of the flour, totaling 3,600 pounds, and the stopping of 17,000 more pounds at the mill. This was the only case of any food poisoning caused by food shipped in interstate commerce.

Every year there are a certain number of cases where someone has mistaken a chemical- usually a white powder- for flour, baking powder, or salt. Sodium fluoride is a powdered household insecticide often used to get rid of roaches and other insect pests. It ought never to be kept anywhere near the food pantry. Wherever sodium fluoride is kept- or any other insecticide or poison,- such substances ought to be plainly labeled by name and marked POISON, then placed out of reach of children or helpers unaccustomed to the location of the food supplies.

Then we would not hear of so many cases like the following:

"A death resulted from eating home-made cherry pie because sodium fluoride had been accidentally mixed with the flour." "Gravy thickened with sodium fluoride instead of flour caused the illness of three and death of one." "A roach powder containing sodium fluoride accidentally used for a baking powder caused the illness of 10 people and resulted in the death of 2 of them."

Rat poison, a mixture of barium carbonate and arsenic, is another chemical compound which in some manner got into the flour used for thickening gravy. That mistake cost the life of one person and made three others seriously ill. The most extensive of the chemical poisonings brought to the attention of the Food and Drug Administration during the year was due to the accidental contamination of scrapple with arsenic. One hundred people were stricken in one community.

Sodium nitrite, in some unexplained way substituted for ordinary table salt, was responsible in a food poisoning case in which 2 persons died and one was made very ill after eating gumbo and rice. When the food was analyzed it was found to contain the nitrite but no salt. The one surviving member of the family identified the jar containing the nitrite as the one from which the gumbo and rice has supposedly been salted.

Such experiences emphasize the vital necessity for care in the home storage of poisons, Food and Drug officials point out. However, they also stress the importance of adequate processing for home canned food, and care in the selecting and handling of all food in the home kitchen. Strict cleanliness, thorough cooking, refrigeration and supervision of kitchen helpers will help to eliminate food poisoning due to carelessness.

